Voices of Students, Parents, and Teachers in China’s Secondary Education Reform

ABSTRACT: The goal of this study was to examine how and to what extent secondary teachers have implemented educational reforms in China that have had a direct impact on students, teachers, and parents. The survey concluded that teachers and parents liked the reform initiatives. Most teachers were able to make changes that supported the reforms even though the changes required more time, effort, and new knowledge. Teachers lacked in-service professional development and resources. Both students and teachers experienced difficulties that arose from the conflict between activity-based learning and exam-oriented systems. Parents and society need to change their mindsets of valuing exam achievements. Chinese educators are at the crossroads of whether the ‘quality’ movement is what the students and society need at this time. Leaders who want to implement change will have to pay attention to the voices of stakeholders.

In the 1990s, large-scale education reform orchestrated by provincial, state or national governments emerged around the world (Fullan, 2000). Whitty, Power, and Halpin (1998) studied reforms in Australia, England, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States. Each country had its unique history and context, but all of the governments introduced policies that sought to reformulate the relationship among government, schools, and parents and develop closer links among objectives, programs, teaching, and assessment.

In 1999, the Chinese Department of Education introduced its ‘quality education’ reform with similar policy and curriculum changes. “Outline of Reform on Curriculum in Basic Education” was published in 2001, and about half of the Chinese schools had implemented the reform by 2003 (Liu & Qi, 2005). There has been little attention paid to the reform, however, because of restricted access to data and language difficulties. This reform involves major changes in secondary schools. In curriculum content, student understanding and application of concepts are emphasized. In teaching, special attention is given to teachers’ use of various teaching and learning methods and to a variety of assessments (Liu & Qi, 2005). They have important implications for how teachers do their work, and for what and how students learn. Teachers play key roles in reforms as the agents of change who work directly with students. Fullan (1996) explains, “We need to first focus on how teachers make sense of the mandates and policies because there will be no educational reform until after teachers interpret the policies and make decisions based on their beliefs about the new demands” (p.12).

We must also pay attention to the influence of reforms on students (Earl and Sutherland, 2003). Fullan & Stiegelbauer (1991) posed the question: "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?” (p. 170). Levin (2000) claimed there must logically be a role for students in shaping the nature of schooling and hence of reform. What about the role of parents? Do their opinions matter? The objectives of this study, therefore, were to investigate the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents on the implementation of secondary reform in China. This research drew attention to reforms that had direct impact on teachers and, in turn, on students and parents in China. These reforms include curriculum planning, teaching strategies, assessment and evaluation strategies, special education programs, post-secondary opportunities, high-stakes examination, sex and gender attitudes, and parental involvements.

Educational Significance
As has been shown elsewhere (Levin, 2000), educational leaders in both China and other jurisdictions who endeavour to implement change should pay attention to both human and personal factors. Human factors include teachers, students, and parents who make a difference in the efforts to successfully implement school reforms. Personal factors include such elements as philosophy, values, and social and ethical orientations. In large-scale reform studies, there are a limited number of studies on China. This study sheds some light on recent education reform in China.

Perspectives: China Education Reform “Quality Education”

In 1999, ‘quality education’ reform was introduced in China. Major changes included the introduction of new curriculum, student-centered teaching and learning, vocational schools, and the development of special education. According to Chen (as quoted in Kappa Delta Pi, 2002), Chinese classrooms are usually teacher-centered and very structured, and students are passive learners. Chinese education tends to emphasize book knowledge rather than practical ability. Because of government examinations, teachers have the same syllabus and must follow it. China is trying to change the rigid situation through curriculum reform. Chen concluded that Chinese teachers must learn how to teach students in different ways and adapt some of the strategies used in the West, e.g., activity-based learning. As parts of the reform, new textbooks and syllabi have been developed, new assessment and evaluation strategies have been introduced, and more flexibility has been given to local schools. In-service workshops were offered to teachers. Chen concluded that the biggest challenge for teachers will be how to integrate new methods and yet maintain the strength of Chinese education with an emphasis on basic knowledge and skills. Chinese reform has another roadblock. Secondary schools are divided into junior and senior levels. Graduates at each level wishing to continue their education take an entrance exam. China has the age-old National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE), and successful completion of these has always been the goal of every single Chinese student (Feng, 1999). Zhang (2004) stated that the solid tradition of exam-oriented education of acceptant learning had affected courses, teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, and the system of evaluation and selection. Due to the reform conflicts with China's traditional school system and the unchanged university entrance examinations, it remains doubtful whether ‘quality education’ efforts will be successful. Zhang (2004) also claimed that there was little research on ‘quality education’ in China, and that it was very important to carry out the overall and predictive research on reform efforts and the development of basic education.

Research Methods and Sources of Data

Two research methods were used: administration of questionnaire surveys and classroom observations. Major sources of data for this study were surveys for teachers, students, and parents. Surveys for the first two stakeholders were adapted and translated from surveys conducted in a study on teachers’ and students’ perceptions of Ontario secondary reform (Ryan & Joong, 2005). Sample questions in both surveys involved ranking (5-point Likert scale) of how often a teaching or evaluation strategy is used for a course. The parents’ survey contained questions pertaining to the reform. All three surveys contained questions on post-secondary opportunities, high-stakes examinations, sex and gender attitudes, and parental involvements. Questionnaires were field tested at a secondary school to ensure that respondents understood and could complete all items as expected. This test-retest method meant that refinements were made to all elements within the package, especially the questionnaire items, in order to facilitate reading, interpretation, comprehension, and completion. The population for this study involved junior and senior secondary schools in Guangxi Autonomous Region, a poor region in western China. Sixteen sample schools were selected representing large and small urban cities, remote areas, ethnicities, and SES (socio-economic status) backgrounds in western China. Sample schools included twelve academic schools and four vocational/technical schools. At each sample school, 25 randomly selected teachers, 100 students, and 100 parents completed separately designed questionnaires in May/June 2005. Classroom observations of curriculum materials, and teaching and assessment strategies used, were carried out at one sample school.

Once the completed, coded surveys were in-hand, surveys were read and a tally was completed that allowed us to develop percentages for closed question responses for each of the coded schools. Our open-ended items were scaled on a continuum from strongly disagree to agree. These were also counted, and the frequencies of the responses were then converted to descriptive data such as percentages.
Results

Students’ Voices

Of the 1464 student respondents (return rate of 91.5%), 64.4% were from farming communities. Ethnic groups were mostly Zhuong, Han, and Maonan. To achieve good results, students were often overloaded with homework and had no time to develop their own interests (Tao, 2003). There was a low but significant negative correlation (-.125**) between course difficulty and good classroom behaviour, negative significant (-.277**) correlation between course difficulty and achievement, and positive but insignificant correlation (.048) between classroom behaviour and achievement. The mean number of courses sample students took was 9.67 (SD=1.7). According to student respondents, teaching methods often used include teacher talk and individualized learning. Teachers sometimes used questioning, group work, and classroom activities and discussions. As for evaluations, teachers often used traditional tests and exams and sometimes used assignments, performance, and group work. The mean number of hours spent on homework and studying were 1.95 hours (SD=1.74) and 1.6 (SD=1.7) respectively, giving a total of almost 3.5 hours per day. When asked who they would approach to discuss schoolwork, 55% would go to friends/classmates, 35% would go to parents, and 16% would approach the teachers. On gender issues, 78% of the respondents claimed that there is no relationship between gender and ability and achievement. Over 83% of the student respondents, including the girls, claimed that their families would want them to go to university if they have the ability. When asked for their opinions on the exam system, 23% suggested that exams should be abandoned, 14% suggested modifications, and 18% said exams should be kept. Forty-two percent had no opinion. On dating, top responses were: to have normal friendships, focus on studies at this age, and date as long as it did not affect school work.

Parents’ Voices

Of the 834 parent respondents (return rate of 52%), 70% were males and 30% were females. Their occupations were farmers (40%), small business owners (12%), professionals (11%), government employees (6%), teachers (4%), and unemployed/retired (5%). The SES of parents included high (2%), medium (40.5%), and low (57%). Educational backgrounds included primary (15%), Grade 10 (40%), Grade 12 (32%), technical college (7%), and university (5.6%).

a) Satisfaction with Curriculum and Teaching

Of the parent respondents, 49.2% were satisfied, 7.7% were not, and 43% had no opinion. When asked what areas need improvement, top responses were: more practical and relevant courses (90 respondents); development of students’ creativity, interest, and potential (43); more optional courses (40); reduction of the course load (35); improvement of teaching strategies (32); use of new resources/computer technology (21); and more disciplines (14).

b) Curriculum Reform

Parent respondents were given a list of possible reform initiatives in the schools and asked to rate them as agree or disagree on a 5-point Likert scale:
1. Parents and teachers support and encourage each other (69 % agree, 6.8% disagree)
2. School encourages parents to make suggestions for improvements (67% agree, 8% disagree)
3. School administrators and parents support each other (65% agree, 9% disagree)
4. School has enough resources to undergo new educational reforms (63.5% agree, 8.8% disagree)
5. School goals are designed to improve curriculum and teaching (61% agree, 6% disagree)
6. School finds the right balance between too many and too few changes (41% agree, 13% disagree)
In general, about two-thirds of the parent respondents were satisfied with the reforms, especially those involving parents. It is clear that parental involvement was high.

c) Post-Secondary School Opportunities

After graduation from lower or senior secondary schools, more than half (55%) of the parents wanted their children to continue their education, 19% wanted them to work, while 14% had no preferences.
d) Gender and Education

When asked if girls have the ability to continue their studies, over 62% of the parent respondents claimed that their families would want them to go to university. However, almost 60% of parent respondents claimed that their families would have difficulties sending them to university. When asked for their opinions on the exam system, 44% said exams should be kept, 34% suggested modifications, only 4% suggested abandonment, and 16% had no opinion. When parent respondents were asked their opinions on dating, 77% thought that it was normal for their children to date, while 23% claimed that it was not appropriate at this age because school must come first.

Teachers’ Voices

The 279 teacher respondents (return rate of 69.7%) were equally divided in terms of sex. The mean teaching experience was 12 years. Fifty-four percent completed university studies and 41.3% received senior secondary education. Sample teachers were well represented in different subject areas and grade levels with the top four being Chinese literature (21%), math (19%), English (17%), and science (14%). Mean class size was 50, but teachers preferred 44. According to the teachers, student SES included low (58%), middle (29%), and high (4.5%).

a) Education Reforms and Changes

The following were changes in the sample schools as perceived by the respondent teachers: school administration and management systems (72%); teacher evaluation and professional development (59%); and curriculum, teaching, and evaluation strategies (54%).

b) Curriculum Planning, Teaching Strategies and Student Evaluation

On average, respondent teachers spent 25.47 hours each week preparing classes. A majority (79%) of the respondent teachers used the new national curriculum materials. A majority (66%) claimed that the current curriculum was good, while 3.5% claimed that it was weak. Most teachers claimed that they did not receive sufficient resources (71%) and professional development (76%). They would like to receive more professional development in teaching methods (75%), curriculum development (65%), use of computers in the classroom (62%), and classroom management (42%). Teaching methods used by teachers included teacher talk, individualized learning, questioning, class discussions, and activities. Teachers sometimes used group work, experiment/demonstration, and student presentations. As for student evaluations, teachers often used traditional tests and exams. They sometimes used assignments, performance, and group work. When compared with students’ responses to the same questions, it seems that teachers claimed they used more varieties of strategies than the students claimed. Respondent teachers claimed they occasionally experienced classroom management problems. They said that time on task is between average and good. Top reasons given for lost time included: lack of self-discipline by students, boredom with school, and lack of basics/interests. In general, respondent teachers were quite satisfied with their courses. Areas that needed improvement included teaching strategies and curriculum planning for student-centered learning, student-teacher relationships, student motivation, and use of technology.

c) Meeting the Needs of Students with Special Needs

About one-third of the sample teachers answered this question. Most of the identified needs involved students with learning and behavioural difficulties. The percentage of ‘special’ students in their classes was mostly under 10%. Provisions were made by teachers (49%), by the school (24%), and by the students themselves (28%). Teachers provided extra individual help and modified curriculum for learners with learning difficulties, special seating arrangements for behavioural or “active” students, and enrichment for gifted students.

d) Teachers’ Personal Opinions of Changes in Education and Students

Major changes involved changes in curriculum, new textbooks, teaching strategies that included activity-based learning and group work, and the use of technology. Negative effects included student motivation, management
issues, and teacher-student relationships. Most respondents offered positive comments about ‘quality education’ as changes reflected on societal changes. One teacher said, “The government put more money in education, students pay less, and we have better classrooms and dormitories.” Another said, “Schools have more facilities. More students have the chance to do experiments.” A few teachers claimed, “We don’t have enough facilities, teaching reform is just all talk and no action.” This is especially true in rural schools. One teacher described the change as, “in the past, students begged teachers for education, but now teachers are begging students to accept education.” When compared with previous students, most teachers who responded felt that current students have weaker backgrounds, are less motivated, and have poorer attitudes. One teacher from a countryside school said, “Influenced by society, many countryside students’ study attitudes are getting worse.” Another said, “Most junior middle school students don’t know how to study by themselves. Students don’t have active attitudes towards studying. Their abilities are getting weaker.” Yet another said, “Great change happened. Students don’t have enough motivation and active attitude. Their abilities are worse. Some of them even make progress in cheating.” One teacher explained, “The Law of Compulsory Education changed students’ attitudes to negative.” Another major reason is the thought that, “education is useless” in our society, as job opportunities for the educated are few. This is especially true in rural areas. On the other hand, some students were more active and independent and were better at problem solving and critical thinking skills. One teacher said, “Students’ study attitudes don’t change. But their abilities change. They think faster and deeper.” Quite a few respondents expressed the frustration mentioned by Tao (2003), that the exam-oriented teaching and learning had greatly restrained the creativity and potential of students. One teacher said, “There are few changes in education for all-round development, our teaching is still test-oriented.” Another said, “Traditional test-oriented teaching is still very common. But teaching methods and teaching concepts have obviously changed.” Quite a few teachers felt that the traditional exam system is in conflict with “quality education.” However, as one teacher summed up, “the idea of ‘Quality Education for All’ has already been carried out.”

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study drew attention to many educational reforms that have had direct impact on teachers and, in turn, on students and parents in China. The reforms include curriculum planning, teaching strategies, student evaluation, special education programs, post-secondary opportunities, high-stakes examination, sex and gender attitudes, and parental involvements. In general, about half of the teachers and parents who responded were satisfied with the reforms. Teachers indicated that there was inadequate support in terms of resources and professional development, especially in the two key areas of the current reforms: teaching methods and curriculum development. Resources in rural schools are scarce and teachers in rural schools have to go to cities for training. Within teaching practices, most teachers were using a variety of teaching methods, although the lecture method still dominated. Students indicated that their teachers used lecture and individualized learning methods predominantly. As for student evaluations, teachers often used traditional tests and exams, and students had similar claims. Provisions were made by respondent teachers in meeting the needs of students with special needs. Teachers also pointed to the negative effects resulting from reforms or societal changes. These effects included student motivation, management issues, and lack of respect for teachers. Results suggested that all of the reforms, including curriculum planning, teaching strategies, student evaluation, and special education program delivery, had a direct impact on students. When asked if girls should have the ability to continue their studies, a majority of the respondents from all three groups claimed that they should. On the issue of the exam system, only 38% of the parent and student respondents claimed that they should be modified or abandoned. On dating, most respondents thought that it is normal for students to date as long as it does not interfere with schooling.

Discussion

Observations, this past year, of the initial stages of the reform in China, and results of this study indicate that teachers have dedicated themselves to the education of students and have made the necessary changes in their curriculum design, teaching strategies, and student evaluation methods to adopt most of the reforms and have used these to some extent at the classroom level. However, even though teachers claimed that they like the reform, many experienced difficulties in its implementation. Based on the different responses between students and teachers to the teaching methods employed by their teachers, it was difficult to determine whether teachers were actually using more activity-based teaching and learning. There were concerns with classroom management as new modes of teaching and transitioning created new situations and opportunities for students to deviate from expected behaviors. Revisions in teacher training would have an impact on the implementation of new modes of teaching and classroom
management and the absence of these is noted herein as a reform flaw. Most of the teacher respondents indicated the need for more training in teaching methods and curriculum development. Change in education requires stakeholder involvement, precise timing, and large amounts of support (funding) in-service (Ryan & Joong, 2005; Earl, Freeman, Sutherland, & Torrance, 2002). Without resources and in-service training, teachers have struggled to bring about a portion of the planned governmental changes in pedagogy and practices as outlined in the reforms. Some incremental change has been possible, yet secondary teachers have reported feeling overwhelmed and under-supported as the large-scale reforms have taken hold. Ryan and Joong (2005) had similar findings in their study of secondary reforms in Ontario. With the current exam system, sample teachers claimed that there was little room for activity-based learning and other experimentations. Huang (2004) was correct in saying exams still guide how we teach and learn in school, and that we should reform our exam system to improve the quality of education. However, only 4% of the parent respondents suggested that the exam system should be abandoned and 34% suggested that it should be modified. Tao (2003) may be correct in saying that the reform involves not only the entire education system but also society. Parents and society need to change their mindsets of valuing exam achievements. Zhang (2004) agreed with Tao that the solid tradition of exam-oriented education of acceptant learning has affected courses, teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, and the system of evaluation and selection. Chinese teachers, educators, and educational leaders are at the crossroads of whether the ‘quality’ movement is what the students and society need at this time. Educational leaders in both China and other jurisdictions with high-stakes examination systems who want to implement change will have to make similar decisions.

**Recommendations**

In 2002, Chen from the Chinese Ministry of Education recommended that Chinese teachers must integrate new methods and yet maintain an emphasis on basic knowledge and skills. Huang (2004) recommended that teachers need to make favourable conditions for learning by experiments. This includes making good use of facilities, stimulating students’ creative abilities, supporting cooperative learning, and using diversified evaluations.

Educational leaders and teachers in all jurisdictions should learn from the Chinese reform efforts. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations from this study will bolster and amplify the signals sent from similar studies concerning education reforms and assist stakeholders in designing curricula, in adapting exemplary teaching strategies, and in implementing quality assessment strategies.

It is recommended that Chinese Ministry officials and school leaders provide more funding for resources and in-service training, especially in the rural areas. Second, it is recommended that all teachers adopt, or continue to use, a variety of teaching methods, and reduce the amount of lecture time. Third, Ministry officials should “reform [the] exam system to improve the quality of education.” (Huang, 2004) This may include local school input of examination results as is done in some jurisdictions in the West.

Teachers play key roles in reforms as the agents of change who work directly with students. Fullan (1996, p. 12) suggested that education reform depends on how teachers make sense of the mandates and policies. In years to come, a critical component of conducting research will continue to include making decisions about what will be explored and what will be left out. In the case of large-scale reforms, the inclusion of the voices not only of teachers, but also of students and parents is crucial in the change process. Leaders who want to implement change will have to pay attention to the voices of stakeholders. The school level factors that make a difference in the successful implementation of school reforms are the creation and attainment of a shared vision, the provision of necessary resources and professional development, and the establishment of a climate supportive of change.

**References**


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